Systems Accreditation

A Handbook for School Systems

AdvancED is dedicated to advancing excellence in education worldwide. The North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI), the Northwest Accreditation Commission (NWAC), and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI) are accreditation divisions of AdvancED.

Copyright © 2012 AdvancED®
Table of Contents

Welcome ........................................................................................................................................ 3

Resources ...................................................................................................................................... 4

Introduction to Systems Accreditation ......................................................................................... 5
  Overview ........................................................................................................................................ 5
  The System Accreditation Process ................................................................................................. 5
  Role of the System Facilitator ........................................................................................................ 7
  Steps to Systems Accreditation ....................................................................................................... 8

Chapter 1: Beginning the Accreditation Process ......................................................................... 9
  Applying .......................................................................................................................................... 9
  ASSIST ........................................................................................................................................... 9
  Preparing for and Hosting the Readiness Review .......................................................................... 9
  Moving to Candidacy ....................................................................................................................... 10

Chapter 2: Engaging in Internal Review .................................................................................... 11
  Understanding and Completing the ASSIST Diagnostics .............................................................. 11

Chapter 3: Preparing for the External Review .......................................................................... 12
  Working with the State Office and External Review Lead Evaluator ............................................. 12
  Developing the Review Schedule .................................................................................................... 12
  Preparing the Superintendent’s Overview ...................................................................................... 13
  Preparing Brief Presentations on the Standards ............................................................................ 14
  Setting Up Interviews ..................................................................................................................... 14
  Preparing Interviewees .................................................................................................................. 17
  Understanding and Planning for the School Reviews .................................................................... 17
  Understanding the Role and Purpose of Classroom Observations .............................................. 17
  Preparing for the Presentation of the Team’s Findings for the System ....................................... 18
  Coordinating Team Logistics ......................................................................................................... 19
  Hosting the Pre-Review with the Lead Evaluator ......................................................................... 20
  Making Final Preparations ............................................................................................................... 20

Chapter 4: Hosting the External Review .................................................................................... 21
  Attending to the Details .................................................................................................................. 21
  Keys to Success .............................................................................................................................. 23

Chapter 5: Continuing the Journey .......................................................................................... 24
  Receiving the Written Report of the External Review Team ......................................................... 24
  Receiving Notice of Accreditation Status and Celebrating with the Community ...................... 24
  Acting on the External Review Team’s Findings ......................................................................... 24
  Completing the Accreditation Progress Report ............................................................................ 25
  Maintaining Momentum ................................................................................................................. 26

Conclusion ................................................................................................................................... 27

Appendix ....................................................................................................................................... 27
Welcome

This brief handbook is designed to help you with the steps and logistics of the AdvancED® Systems Accreditation Process – from beginning the process to preparing for and hosting the External Review to continuing the journey after the review.

The AdvancED Accreditation Process represents the unified accreditation process for the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI), the Northwest Accreditation Commission (NWAC), and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI). Schools seeking to earn and maintain NCA CASI, NWAC, or SACS CASI accreditation follow the AdvancED Accreditation Process.

If you have questions or need assistance during the process, please contact your AdvancED State Office. A directory of AdvancED state offices can be found at www.advanc-ed.org in the “Locations” tab.
Resources

AdvancED provides a range of support and resources to assist school systems in their pursuit and maintenance of accreditation.

Standards

*AdvancED Accreditation Standards for Quality School Systems*

The Standards are the foundation of the accreditation process and can be downloaded at www.advanc-ed.org under the “ACREDITATION” tab.

Processes, Steps, and Procedures

Visit www.advanc-ed.org under the “ACREDITATION” tab for an overview of the School Systems Accreditation Process. Scroll to the bottom of the page and click on “School Systems Accreditation” where you will find:

- Review the AdvancED Accreditation Standards for School Systems
- Get a step by step overview of the process
- View the AdvancED Policies and Procedures
- Readiness Assessment (to be completed before the readiness review)
- Complete the Application for Accreditation

Reports, Resources, and Tools

A wide range of useful resources and tools for school systems can be accessed online at www.advanc-ed.org/districtresources.

Products and Services

AdvancED offers a range of products and services to school systems. Visit www.advanc-ed.org under the “RESOURCES” tab for a current listing of publications, resources, and tools.

State Office Support

State offices provide hands-on support and technical assistance to school systems as they engage in the Systems Accreditation Process. Many states tap the expertise of trained Field Consultants to support schools and school systems. School systems can contact their state offices to learn more about the range of services and support available to them. A complete directory of State offices can be found at www.advanc-ed.org under the “Locations” tab.
Introduction to Systems Accreditation

Overview

Accreditation is a voluntary method of quality assurance developed more than 100 years ago by American universities and secondary schools, and designed primarily to distinguish schools adhering to a set of educational Standards. Today the accreditation process is used at all levels of education, and is recognized for its ability to effectively drive student performance and continuous improvement in education.

Institutions seeking to gain or retain accreditation by AdvancED must meet AdvancED Standards. These Standards focus on systems within a school and systematic methods of attaining high student performance and organizational effectiveness. The Standards address preparing students with skills they will need for the future and include high expectations for professional practice. The Standards require demonstrated growth in student learning and achievement; a commitment to developing learning, thinking, and life skills for all students; and formal structures whereby each student is well known. The power of the Standards lies in the connections and linkages between and among the Standards.

Institutions must also participate in an external review, completed by a team of highly qualified external peer evaluators who examine the institution's adherence and commitment to AdvancED Standards. This review is the hallmark of the accreditation process, and energizes and equips the leadership and stakeholders of an institution or school system to maintain areas of high performance and tackle those areas that may be thwarting desired performance levels. The external review is a rigorous process that includes review of artifacts, interviews with stakeholders, and observations of instruction, learning, and operations.

The System Accreditation Process: Responsibilities of the System

The accreditation process is based on a five-year term accreditation. It is an ongoing process of meeting Standards, engaging in continuous improvement, and demonstrating quality assurance. The following chart outlines how the process unfolds and the responsibilities of the system over the five-year term.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Timing</th>
<th>System's Responsibilities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Every year</td>
<td>• Adhere to the AdvancED Standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Engage in ongoing self-assessment and continuous improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Document results of improvement efforts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Update demographic and contact information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Notify AdvancED of any substantive changes in the system's ability to meet the Standards</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Between four weeks and six months before External Review all completed and submitted in ASSIST | • Self Assessment  
• Improvement Plan  
• Executive Summary  
• Assurances  
• Student Performance Diagnostic  
• Stakeholder Feedback Diagnostic |
|---|---|
| Year of External Review | • Prepare for the External Review Team, working with the Lead Evaluator to establish the review schedule and make arrangements for the team.  
• Gather evidence and documentation in preparation for the team's review of the system's adherence to the Standards.  
• Host the External Review Team.  
• Share the findings from the External Review Team report with the community.  
• Begin acting on the team's required actions. |
| Following the External Review | • Review and discuss the findings from this report with all stakeholders.  
• Ensure that plans are in place to embed and sustain the strengths noted in the Powerful Practices section to maximize their impact on the system.  
• Develop action plans to address the required actions made by the team. Include methods for monitoring progress toward the required actions.  
• Use the report to guide and strengthen the system's efforts to improve student performance and the system’s effectiveness.  
• Following the External Review, submit the Accreditation Progress Report (APR) detailing progress made toward addressing the required actions. Systems are required to respond to all required actions. The required actions should be completed by the due date for submitting the APR. The report will be reviewed at the state and national level to ensure that significant progress is being made toward the required actions. Lack of progress can result in a change in accreditation status.  
• Continue to meet the AdvancED Accreditation Standards, submit required reports, engage in continuous improvement, and document results. |
The System Accreditation Process: Responsibilities of the School

Each of the schools connected to a system are responsible for contributing to the preparations for hosting and AdvancED External Review Team. Each school will be responsible for updating their demographics and completing and submitting each of the following diagnostics in ASSIST:

- Executive Summary
- Self-Assessment
- AdvancED Assurances
- Stakeholder Surveys
- Student Performance

Role of the System Facilitator

Often the Superintendent assigns a senior staff member to facilitate the accreditation process for the system. The facilitator:

- Serves as the key point of contact between AdvancED and the system;
- Works with the External Review Lead Evaluator to prepare for and host the External Review;
- Oversees the accreditation process for the system;
- Supports the system’s stakeholders throughout the accreditation process, answering questions and providing guidance;
- Ensures that all requirements of the accreditation process are met; and
- Manages the logistics and oversees the schedule for the External Review
Steps to Systems Accreditation

The following flow chart depicts the steps to accreditation. As the system successfully completes these steps, it moves from Applicant to Candidate to Accredited status. This handbook is designed to assist the system with each of these steps. The sections of the workbook that address the various steps are highlighted in blue.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Applicant</th>
<th>Host Readiness Review</th>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Host External Review</th>
<th>Accredited</th>
<th>Maintain Accreditation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apply</td>
<td></td>
<td>Within 3 months</td>
<td>Within 2 years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Corresponding chapters from this handbook that address each step of the process

| Chapter 1: Beginning the Accreditation Process | Chapter 2: Engaging in Internal Review | Chapter 3: Preparing for the External Review | Chapter 4: Hosting the External Review | Chapter 5: Continuing the Journey |
Chapter 1: Beginning the Accreditation Process

Applying

The system begins the accreditation process by reviewing the AdvancED Standards for Quality Systems to determine whether it has the system-wide commitment and the capacity to meet the Standards. The system then submits a Letter of Interest to pursue System Accreditation. The system will receive a Readiness Packet from the Accreditation Department. The appropriate state office is notified to ensure that a Readiness Review is conducted. A successful Readiness Review along with the system’s Letter of Commitment to pursue System Accreditation will enable the system to be classified from applicant status to candidate states. The system is expected to host an AdvancED External Review team within two years of attaining candidate status.

ASSIST

The Adaptive System of School Improvement Support Tools (ASSIST) has been created to function as a school improvement planning framework and an accreditation manager. AdvancED accreditation and school improvement are two processes built upon systems thinking and therefore require schools to use a systems thinking approach. The ASSIST system provides resources and tools for schools and systems in developing informed improvement plans and to manage the accreditation process from beginning to end. Schools and systems can use ASSIST all the time, not just in preparation for an External Review. Institutions in the AdvancED network have access to ASSIST. Schools and systems can assign multiple users to access their institution's ASSIST account. The technology tools in ASSIST have been created to guide schools and systems through this continuous improvement process that includes: data collection, analysis, goal setting, planning, implementation, and evaluation. The ASSIST system also provides tools for completing the required documents that are part of the accreditation process.

Preparing for and Hosting the Readiness Review

Purpose: The Readiness Review is designed to reflect the institution’s readiness for accreditation through a validation of the system’s Self Assessment of Readiness and examination of its practices in relation to the AdvancED Standards for accreditation. By assessing the institution’s readiness, a determination can be made regarding its capacity to meet the AdvancED Standards and requirements for student performance, stakeholder perception data, and assurances.

For information regarding preparation for the Readiness Review and completion of the Self Assessment of Readiness, please go to www.advanc-ed.org/districtresources and click the link to Hosting the Readiness Review, and the Readiness Self Assessment for Systems.

Based on the review, the state office representatives make a determination as to the system’s readiness for accreditation. If the representatives believe the system would benefit from more time to address specific areas of need, they will recommend that the system remain in Applicant status. If this is the case, the system will receive specific instructions regarding necessary next steps. If the representatives believe the system is ready for accreditation, they will recommend that the system be moved to candidate status.
Moving to Candidacy

If the system is recommended for candidacy, the Accreditation Department sends the system a candidacy letter that outlines the next steps of the accreditation process which include:

1) Addressing any required actions noted in the Readiness Report;
2) Ensuring that the system meets all Standards;
3) Identifying dates for the External Review; and
4) Preparing for the External Review.

The candidacy letter includes a Review Date and Team Member Expertise Request Form. The form asks the system to:

- **Identify three preferred dates to host the External Review.** The review needs to be scheduled within two years of the Readiness Review. Review date requests must be made at least 6 months prior to the preferred dates.

- **Indicate any specific expertise** the system would like members of the External Review Team to have based on the needs facing the system.

Most systems identify and submit their preferred review dates and desired expertise shortly after receiving their candidacy letter. This provides them with a targeted time frame for their review and helps them begin preparing for the External Review.

Upon receiving the system’s preferred dates and desired team member expertise, the Accreditation Department sends a letter confirming the dates for the review to the system. The letter provides instructions for preparing for the review.
Chapter 2: Engaging in Internal Review

The Adaptive System of School Improvement Support Tools (ASSIST) offers a suite of diagnostic tools, including a self-assessment, executive summary, student performance, stakeholder feedback, and more. These tools are designed to offer a comprehensive, yet simplistic way of identifying an organization’s strengths and challenges.

Internal and external diagnostics results are an important part of the AdvancED accreditation process, but the intent is for education institutions to use diagnostic tools as part of their ongoing data collection and improvement process.

Understanding and Completing the ASSIST Diagnostics

To prepare for the External Review, the system engages in a comprehensive internal review guided by the AdvancED Self Assessment (SA). The SA is designed to facilitate the process of internal reflection and assessment of the institution's current reality. The SA can be used as often as needed as a reflective process but is only submitted once prior to the External Review.

Go to www.advanc-ed.org/districtresources and click on the links to Using ASSIST to Prepare for an External Review, the Self Assessment Workbook for Systems, and the Self Assessment Workbook for Systems - Concept Map.

In addition to completing the SA, the system collaboratively prepares and submits an Executive Summary (ES) in ASSIST. The ES allows the system to tell its unique story, providing the organizational context for the system’s self-assessment. Comprised of four sections, the ES includes: 1) an introduction; 2) a summary of student performance; 3) a discussion of challenges and opportunities; and 4) a conclusion. Guiding questions assist the system in crafting each section of the ES.

Regular demographics updates are essential for AdvancED and the system to maintain communications and data collection.

Go to www.advanc-ed.org/districtresources and click on the link to Access and Complete Demographics Update Online.

The system uses ASSIST to complete and submit the Self Assessment, Executive Summary, Student Performance, and Stakeholder Feedback diagnostics as well as an Improvement Plan and the Assurances.


These components of preparation for the External Review must be completed within four weeks of the scheduled review.
Chapter 3: Preparing for the External Review

Working with the State Office and External Review Lead Evaluator

Having a general understanding of the purpose and functions of the External Review helps the system prepare for a successful review. In addition, the system has the ongoing support of the AdvancED State Office and assigned Lead Evaluator.

The state office is available to support the system with all aspects of the Systems Accreditation Process – from informing and engaging stakeholders to completing required reports to providing technical assistance in responding to the team’s required actions. Systems are encouraged to use their state offices as a resource and partner in their accreditation and continuous improvement efforts.

The Lead Evaluator is also available to support the system. As the review date approaches, the system works closely with the Lead Evaluator to:

• Establish the review schedule;
• Coordinate logistics for the team;
• Address any questions and/or concerns related to review preparation;
• Host a Pre-Review with the system approximately four weeks prior to the review; and
• Ensure the system is ready for the review.

Developing the Review Schedule

The System Facilitator works with the External Review Lead Evaluator to develop the review schedule. External Reviews are conducted from Monday morning through Wednesday afternoon. A sample schedule is available at www.advanc-ed.org/districtresources, click on Sample External Review Schedule. Following is an overview of key components of a system’s External Review.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Components of a Typical External Review Schedule</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evening Before Review (or early morning of the review)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team meeting for orientation (2-3 hours)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities During Review</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>System Overview and Standards Presentations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Superintendent provides general orientation to team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• System personnel provide brief presentation on the system’s adherence to each of the five standards and highlight key artifacts related to the Standard</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Team interviews system leadership and improvement team, Governing Body Members, parents, building administrators and community members. Additional time may be allocated for interviews with support staff and students. (Each interview lasts approximately 45 minutes.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Artifact Review
• Team reviews system artifacts (this occurs on an ongoing basis)

Observations at Schools Selected for Visits
• Principal and/or designee provides an instructional tour of the school
• Team conducts classroom observations
• Team makes general observations throughout the review

Professional Deliberations
• Team meets to examine the data collected and reach consensus regarding the team’s findings

Meeting with the Superintendent
• Prior to the delivery of the Exit Report, the Lead Evaluator meets with the Superintendent to review the team’s findings and discuss the team’s required actions

Exit Report
• Lead Evaluator provides Exit Report to system’s stakeholders at the conclusion of the review

Preparing the Superintendent’s Overview
At the beginning of the External Review, the Superintendent welcomes the External Review Team and provides an overview of the system. The purpose of the Superintendent’s remarks is to set the tone and context for the review. The following questions are designed to assist the Superintendent in thinking about the type of content to include in his/her remarks:

• What will help the team quickly gain an understanding of the system’s challenges, strengths, and opportunities?
• What information will best convey what the system is trying to accomplish for students?
• How is the system meeting the needs of its students – currently and over time?
• What does the system want the team to look for? What advice/support would the system like the team to provide over the course of the review?

Team members find it helpful when the Superintendent’s comments include an overview of the system’s vision and purpose, basic demographic information about the system, a description of challenges, an overview of key programs and improvement initiatives, and a snapshot of student performance results using multiple measures over time.

The Superintendent’s overview typically lasts between 30 and 45 minutes. It is helpful to provide team members with a copy of the Superintendent’s comments for use and reference during the review.
Preparing Brief Presentations on the Standards

Typically, following the Superintendent’s overview, system personnel provide brief presentations on each of the AdvancED Standards. The presentations provide the External Review Team with a general overview and description of how the school is meeting each Standard. The overview lasts approximately one hour. The following questions are designed to help system personnel as they develop the presentations for the overview:

• What does the system most want the team to know about each Standard as the team begins its work?
• What information about each Standard does the system wish to highlight and/or clarify from the Self Assessment?
• What artifacts does the system wish to bring to the team’s attention that helps demonstrate the system’s adherence to one or more Standards?
• What processes and practices does the system wish to explain that demonstrate how it is meeting the Standard?
• What does the system want the team to look for and/or verify with regard to each Standard as it conducts its review?

Setting Up Interviews

Purpose and coordination. A critical component of the External Review is interviews of system stakeholders. The purpose of the interviews is to provide an opportunity for the External Review Team to gather information from a variety of stakeholders about the system’s adherence to the AdvancED accreditation requirements. The Superintendent and/or School Facilitator, with support from the system’s leadership team, identifies, invites, and schedules stakeholders to be interviewed by the External Review Team.

Structure of the interviews and questions asked. The interviews last between 45 minutes and one hour. They begin with a brief overview of the purpose of the interviews and the role of the External Review Team. The team members and the interviewees then introduce themselves. Following these introductory activities, the team asks broad questions which address each of the AdvancED Standards, the system’s profile, and the system’s methods for quality assurance. The questions are tailored as appropriate for each stakeholder group.

Stakeholder groups to be interviewed. The team interviews the following stakeholder groups, including, but not limited to:

• System leadership and improvement team
• Governing Board members
• School principals and leadership team
• Teachers
• Parents and community partners
• Support staff
• Students (when appropriate)

The system and Lead Evaluator may add to and/or adapt the groups interviewed.
Selecting interviewees. The following guidelines are designed to help the System Facilitator identify stakeholders to be interviewed.

### Guidelines for Identifying Stakeholders to Be Interviewed

Stakeholders should collectively:

- Reflect the system’s broader community  
  *(socio-economic levels, race and ethnicity, neighborhoods served by the school, etc.)*
- Provide a range of viewpoints and perspectives  
  *(strong and active supporters of the system/school, critics of the system/school, those who are less involved, etc.)*
- Represent all levels and departments in the system/school  
  *(e.g., different grade levels and different subject areas at the school)*
- Represent all major categories of positions in the system  
  *(e.g., leadership, administrative, teaching, guidance, and support functions)*
- Include individuals who can discuss the system’s/school’s strengths and challenges

The overarching questions to ask when identifying stakeholders to be interviewed are:

- Will the stakeholders collectively provide an accurate assessment of the system/school for the External Review Team?
- Do the stakeholders collectively have enough knowledge of the system’s/school’s practices with regard to the AdvancED Standards to yield meaningful information?
- Will the stakeholders collectively yield information that will prove valuable to the system/school in its continuous improvement efforts?

While it may be tempting to identify only those stakeholders who are active and strong supporters of the system/school, it does not maximize the insights and richness of the findings that can emerge from these interviews that ultimately benefit the system’s improvement efforts.

Inviting interviewees. The Superintendent/School Facilitator/Principal should begin inviting stakeholders to be interviewed as soon as it has finalized the review schedule (approximately six weeks prior to the review). Following is sample language that can be adapted and used as appropriate when inviting stakeholders to participate in the interviews.
Sample Invitation to Potential Interviewees

Dear <insert name>,

You are cordially invited to participate in <insert name of system/school>’s upcoming accreditation review by serving on a stakeholder interview team.

<insert name of system/school>’s External Review will take place <insert dates>. The review is led by a team of professionals. During the review, the External Review Team conducts interviews with a range of system/school stakeholders, reviews system/school documents and student performance data, and makes professional observations to determine the degree to which the system meets Standards for accreditation. The team shares its findings in oral and written formats and makes an accreditation recommendation for national review. The system uses the findings from the team to further its continuous improvement efforts.

On <insert day>, the External Review Team will be interviewing several stakeholder groups. We would like the team to interview you as part of the <insert interview group> at <insert time> in <insert location>. The interview will last approximately <insert allotted time for interview> minutes. We believe that you have experience, knowledge, and insights that would enhance the team’s understanding of our system/school.

Please reply to this invitation by <insert date>. I hope you can participate in this exciting and valuable process.

Sincerely,

<Superintendent/System Facilitator/Principal
Preparing Interviewees

After stakeholders accept the invitation to serve on an interview team, the system/school sends a brief note to confirm the interview date, time, and location. The note should emphasize the importance of being on time. The note should repeat some of the information from the invitation letter that highlights the purpose and activities of the team. Depending on the stakeholder being interviewed, the system/school may wish to include supporting materials such as a copy of the system’s Self Assessment.

Understanding and Planning for the School Reviews (at selected schools)

The Principal and the Leadership or School Improvement Team participates in an interview with members of the External Review Team. The purpose of the interview is for the team to gain knowledge about the school and how the continuous improvement efforts of the system are implemented at that level.

During the interview, the External Review Team listens for:

- Evidence of a cohesive school improvement process.
- Specific examples of school improvement initiatives that are implemented.
- The process for the collection and use of student performance data to drive instructional decisions at the school and system level.

The External Review Team may review evidence relating to the AdvancED Standards, Student Performance Data, and Stakeholder Feedback.

Understanding the Role and Purpose of Classroom Observations

During the External Review, team members will observe a variety of classrooms. The purpose of classroom observations is to view teaching and learning in action and to corroborate information obtained from interviews and artifacts. Typically lasting approximately 20 minutes, the observations provide an opportunity to see how improvement initiatives are translated into the classroom and to view the impact on teachers and students. The observations allow the team to check for alignment from the administrative to the classroom level. AdvancED’s Effective Learning Environment Observation Tool (ELEOT) will be used by members of the External Review Team to document observable evidence or classroom environments during classroom observations at school sites.

The Principal should notify teachers that the team may observe their classrooms during the review. The Principal should explain the purpose of the observations, emphasizing that the team is observing processes and activities in the school; they are not evaluating teachers. Team members are instructed to be as unobtrusive as possible and to not disrupt the learning process. Teachers should conduct class as usual.
Preparing for the Presentation of the Team’s Findings for the System

Meeting with the Lead Evaluator. When the team has finished its deliberations and solidified its findings, the Lead Evaluator meets with the Superintendent and any staff members he/she designates to participate in the meeting to hear the team’s findings. The School Facilitator schedules the meeting time and location and ensures all participants are informed of the meeting. The meeting provides an opportunity for the Lead Evaluator to discuss the team’s findings with the Superintendent, answer questions, and address any concerns. The Lead Evaluator reviews the Exit Report with the Superintendent prior to it being shared with the Governing Board and school community.

Planning for the Exit Report. At the conclusion of the External Review, the Lead Evaluator presents the team’s findings in the Exit Report, which is typically delivered to the Superintendent, Governing Board, system staff and community members during a properly posted meeting that is open to the public. Questions are not taken during the Exit Report (the meeting with the Lead Evaluator prior to the presentation of the Exit Report is the venue for questions). The Superintendent schedules the time for the Exit Report and ensures all desired participants are informed of the meeting. Systems find that the more stakeholders they involve in hearing the Exit Report, the greater buy-in they achieve in acting on the team’s findings.

Logistics. The Superintendent or System Facilitator coordinate the logistics pertaining to the Exit Report, including:

- Inviting participants
- Preparing a room for the meeting to occur with appropriate seating and audio/visual
- Providing a computer, LCD projector, and screen for the Exit Report presentation which will be delivered via PowerPoint slides
- Providing a podium and/or table from which the Lead Evaluator can deliver the findings
- Providing a microphone, if needed

Agenda. The Superintendent typically begins the meeting with welcoming comments that last approximately five minutes. The Superintendent explains the work the system has undertaken as part of the accreditation process and provides an overview of the External Review Team’s role and activities. The Superintendent then introduces the Lead Evaluator who introduces the rest of the team and begins the Exit Report. The Lead Evaluator’s report lasts 20-25 minutes. Following the report, the Superintendent thanks the team and concludes the meeting.
Coordinating Team Logistics

The system is responsible for coordinating the logistics associated with the External Review. The following checklist is intended to assist with this task:

- Coordinate transportation each day, between the system’s central office and the hotel, for the members of the External Review team.
- Secure hotel room reservations for team members.
- Make all meal arrangements for the team for each day of the External Review (and coordinate any necessary transportation to meals, such as dinner in the evenings).
- Reserve meeting space at the hotel or district office for each night of the review. The meeting room should be organized as a hollow square, with enough chairs to accommodate all members of the team. A screen, LCD projector, power cords (2-3), flip chart paper (at least one full pad), markers (at least one for every member of the team), masking tape, and sticky notes (standard square size, at least one pad for each member of the team). Water and light refreshments are appreciated.
- Reserve a team meeting room at the district office where the team can work, discuss their findings, and review artifacts. The room should include power cords for multiple computers.
- Secure rooms for the interviews.
- Ensure the logistics pertaining to the presentation of the Exit Report are addressed.
- Make name badges for the team members and ensure that system personnel wear their name badges to promote effective and courteous communication.
- Prepare information packets for the team’s arrival (often including a hard copy of the system’s Self Assessment and the External Review schedule). Please note that team members are not allowed to accept gifts from the system (pens, pads of papers, and other items to assist the team with their work are acceptable to provide).
Hosting the Pre-Review with the Lead Evaluator

Approximately four weeks prior to the External Review, the Lead Evaluator conducts a Pre-Review with the system to ensure it ready to host a successful External Review. This review can occur through conference call, electronically (for example, Skype), or an on-site review.

During the Pre-Review, the Lead Evaluator /Associate Lead Evaluator meets with and/or contacts the Superintendent and/or System Facilitator to:

1. Ensure the system has completed all required reports.
2. Review artifacts assembled for the team.
3. Discuss the interview schedule and confirm interviewees. Ensure interviewees include a broad and representative cross section of the school community.
5. Ensure the schedule and necessary logistics to accommodate the team have been finalized.
6. Answer any questions the system has with regard to the External Review.

Making Final Preparations

Following is a checklist to help the system address final preparations for the External Review Team.

☐ At least a week prior to the External Review, confirm all details related to the schedule.
☐ Ensure that all stakeholders involved in the review have a copy of the External Review Team schedule.
☐ E-mail and/or send a reminder to all interviewees.
☐ Make sure that artifacts are accessible and ready for review.
☐ Confirm lodging reservations for the team, if applicable.
☐ Confirm transportation arrangements for each day of the review.
☐ Confirm meals and dinner reservations for the team.
Chapter 4: Hosting the External Review

By following the guidelines outlined in Chapter 2, the system should find that it is well prepared for the External Review. Chapter 2 provides a detailed overview of each component of the review and how to prepare for it. This chapter provides brief tips to help the system host a successful External Review.

The review schedule serves as the primary guide for the review. A sample External Review schedule is available at www.advanc-ed.org/districtresources. The Superintendent and/or System Facilitator manage the schedule and ensure all activities of the review occur as planned. The Superintendent and/or System Facilitator should maintain the schedule and extra copies at all times during the review. He/she should be available for questions and to help the team access needed information throughout the review. It is a good idea for the Superintendent and System Facilitator to provide the Lead Evaluator and members with his/her contact information (including cell phone number) and the names and contact information of other members of the staff should questions or emergencies arise.

Attending to the Details

Once the Review Team has arrived, the System Facilitator ensures all details unfold as planned.

Arrival and Orientation

☐ Confirm lodging and dinner reservations for the team.

☐ Provide team members with hard copies of any information needed for the review. Often, the system supplies name badges, a hard copy of its Self Assessment, a final schedule, and additional system-specific materials. Please note that team members cannot accept gifts from the system.

☐ Check to see that the meeting room for the team’s evening orientation is properly set-up (hollow square with enough seats to accommodate the team, flip chart paper, sticky notes, markers, masking tape, LCD projector, power cords, screen, any school artifacts that the school wants in the team’s work room, water and refreshments).

Day One

• Ensure all team members have transportation to the district office.
• Make sure the meeting room at the district office is ready and meets the team’s needs.
• Ensure easy access to artifacts the team will need.
• Manage the schedule and ensure that all activities stay on schedule.
• Provide lunch for the team.
• Ensure coffee, water, and light refreshments are available for the team throughout the day.
• Provide transportation to the hotel.
• Ensure dinner reservations are confirmed and transportation is provided, if needed.
• Ensure that the team’s meeting room at the hotel is ready for the team.

Day Two
• Ensure all team members have transportation to the school sites to be visited.
• Ensure easy access to artifacts the team will need.
• Manage the schedule and ensure that all activities stay on schedule.
• Provide lunch for the team.
• Ensure coffee, water, and light refreshments are available for the team throughout the day.

Day Three
• Ensure all team members have transportation to the district office.
• Make sure the meeting room at the district office is ready and meets the team’s needs.
• Ensure easy access to artifacts the team will need.
• Manage the schedule and ensure that all activities stay on schedule.
• Prepare for the final meeting between the Lead Evaluator, Superintendent, and any designated staff
• Set up the room for the presentation of the Exit Report (see details in Chapter 2).
• Ensure team members’ transportation needs are addressed.
Keys to Success

Systems that have hosted External Reviews offer the following advice to their colleagues:

- **Be open and honest with the team.** The more authentic and accurate your responses are to the team, the better able the team is to assess the strengths and needs of the system.
- **Stay on schedule.** Use the schedule to guide the review.
- **Communicate with all stakeholders about the review;** the more people who know about the review and the activities of the team, the better. Be as open and transparent about the process as possible.
- **Use and refer to the Self Assessment.** The Self Assessment is perhaps the most valuable component of the review process. The Self Assessment represents the work and thinking of a broad range of stakeholders. Reference it regularly with the team so that it is used to maximize the team’s time and their ability to provide meaningful feedback to the system.
- **Share and encourage the team to review specific artifacts** that you feel are critical to the team's understanding of your system.
- **Highlight the areas where you need the team’s assistance.** The earlier in the process that the team discovers the challenges the system is facing, the more time the team has to consider and craft powerful required actions to support the system in addressing those challenges.
- **Remember, you get out of a process what you put into it.** The system has the ability through its own commitment to the process to make the most out of the External Review. The more committed the system is to gaining valuable support and feedback from peers, the more likely the system is to receive a meaningful External Review.
Chapter 5: Continuing the Journey

While the majority of this handbook is devoted to preparing for the External Review, the majority of the system’s time is spent following the review, acting on the team’s findings and continuing the journey of the accreditation process. This chapter reviews the key activities that occur on an ongoing basis as systems seek to maintain their accreditation and continuously improve.

Receiving the Written Report of the External Review Team

At the conclusion of the External Review, the Lead Evaluator works with the team to finalize the written report of the team’s findings. The report is submitted to the Accreditation Commission for review and action. The system receives the report within 20 working days of the review.

Upon receipt of the written report, the system communicates the External Review Team’s findings to internal and external stakeholders. Sharing the results of the review with a wide range of stakeholders helps educate the system’s community about accreditation and garners buy-in with regard to next steps that the system will take to address the findings in the report.

Receiving Notice of Accreditation Status and Celebrating with the Community

The External Review Team’s report is submitted to AdvancED for national review and action. The national AdvancED Accreditation Commission, the body that grants accreditation, reviews and acts on all accreditation statuses. After the Commission has taken action on the system’s accreditation status, a letter is sent to the system confirming its accreditation status.

Upon receiving the accreditation letter, the system communicates its final accreditation status to internal and external stakeholders. The system receives and displays a certificate of accreditation. Press releases, flags, Q&A guides, and more are available to help systems share and celebrate their accreditation with their community. Practices that many systems find useful include: sharing information about their accreditation with parents at every “Back to School Night” through brochures and/or handouts; including the accreditation seal on their website, school stationery, and student transcripts; posting information about accreditation in a regular column of their system/school newsletters; and including a section on accreditation in their annual reports to the community.

Acting on the External Review Team’s Findings

The External Review Team report serves as a resource to the system as it furthers its continuous improvement efforts. The system celebrates and strengthens the successes and accomplishments noted in the team’s Powerful Practices. The system builds on these accomplishments, enhancing their impact across the entire system.

The team’s Required Actions identify areas of needed action designed to enhance the system’s effectiveness and improve student learning. The system is held accountable for making progress on each of the team’s Required Actions. Following the review, the system submits a report (discussed in the next section) which details the progress made on the Required Actions.
To begin acting on the team’s findings, the system reviews the full team report with stakeholders. In addition to spending time discussing the team’s Powerful Practices and Required Actions, the system studies the strengths and opportunities for improvement included in the report. The report provides clarity, guidance, and direction on the Powerful Practices and Required Actions. Should questions arise during this process, the system seeks clarity from the External Review Lead Evaluator or from the AdvancED Accreditation Department in Tempe, Arizona.

After thorough review of the External Review Team’s findings, the system establishes a plan of action, engaging a representative group of stakeholders in the process. The system determines what this plan looks like and how it puts the plan into action to ensure ongoing progress. The plan typically outlines next steps related to the team’s findings, including actions to strengthen Powerful Practices and strategies for addressing Required Actions. In addition, the plan includes implementation strategies and methods for monitoring, documenting, and analyzing results.

The system implements its strategies for responding to the team’s finding, tracks the progress it is making, and is prepared to answer the questions, “What steps have been taken? What progress has been made? How do we know we’ve made an impact?”

Completing the Accreditation Progress Report

Following the External Review, an AdvancED Accreditation Progress Report (APR) is opened in the AdvancED ASSIST platform. The APR is a report detailing the system’s progress in addressing the Required Actions from the External Review Team report. The system has one or two years, depending on their accreditation status, to summarize its actions to date related to each of the team’s Required Actions. In addition to the summary, the system is asked to classify the current status of each Required Action in one of four categories:

1. Completed – All necessary and appropriate actions have been taken and evaluated. The system has documented evidence that supports fulfillment of the Required Action.
2. In Progress – The system is currently engaged in actions and processes but has yet to fully implement steps necessary to address the Required Action.
3. Did Not Address – The system has not taken any action for one or more of the following reasons: a) it lacks the resources necessary to address the Required Action; or b) it fully intends to address the Required Action but has yet to initiate action.
4. Rejected With Rationale Provided - The system has not taken any action because it professionally disagrees with the Required Action and does not believe that fulfillment of the Required Action will help the system improve (the summary statement must provide substantive evidence to support this claim).

The system completes the report and submits it to AdvancED for review and action at the state and national level. The system receives feedback from AdvancED on the report and notice of any change in accreditation status that may result from the report.
Maintaining Momentum

Accredited systems understand and honor the concept of continuous improvement. They are dynamic, in motion, and continuously evolving with an unrelenting focus on becoming better on behalf of the students they serve. Quality systems operate as learning communities by possessing healthy cultures where individuals collectively analyze practices and results, engage in professional learning and dialogue, take meaningful action, and assume responsibility for results.

When the review concludes and progress reports are filed, the commitment and action continues. Systems remain focused on improving organizational effectiveness and student learning.

Strengthening accreditation. On an ongoing basis, accredited systems adhere to the AdvancED Standards, and engage in review of student performance and stakeholder feedback. As systems continuously improve, they monitor, build capacity, and grow more effective in each of these activities.

AdvancED is available to support systems as they further their improvement efforts. Systems are encouraged to take advantage of AdvancED’s web-based resources, publications, workshops, conferences, and on-site technical assistance as they continue on their journey of improvement.

Sustaining Interest and Commitment. Competent and committed educators are the key to sustained improvement. Systems recognize the importance of enhancing the capacity of staff through continued professional learning that is aligned with organizational purpose, improvement goals, and required actions. Staff confidence comes from having the knowledge, understanding, and skills to thrive while engaging in professional practice. System leaders who create conditions and provide resources to optimize performance and professional growth find the most success in sustaining improvement.

Successful systems shape a culture of learning, collaboration, and high expectations for staff and students and weave it into the fabric of the system. All staff are encouraged to grow through action, experimentation, and reflection. Successes are identified, celebrated, and embedded into practice.

Educators are motivated by their collective mission to impact students and make a difference in their lives. Systems that find the most success with the accreditation process ensure that the connection between accreditation initiatives and student learning is established and understood by all stakeholders.
Conclusion

Congratulations on your commitment to accreditation. As you engage in the accreditation process, you will find that all elements of your system become stronger. The entire community served by the system will benefit as it works to improve its processes to increase systemic effectiveness and enhance student learning.

AdvancED looks forward to supporting you throughout the system accreditation process. We hope this handbook has been helpful, and we welcome any feedback you have on improving its usefulness. Please feel free to share your comments with us at accreditation-info@advanc-ed.org.

Appendix

Resources:  www.advanc-ed.org/districtresources